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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

23 January 1985

SUDAN-LIBYA: Prospects for a Reconciliation

Summary

We believe there is at least an even chance that President Nimeiri will make a tactical reconciliation with Libyan leader Qadhafi before mid-year. Nimeiri is facing a deteriorating economy, eroding security in southern Sudan, and dim prospects for additional support from his allies. For over a year, Qadhafi has actively sought an accommodation as part of a broader effort to limit support to his opponents and end his diplomatic isolation. A reconciliation would do little to solve Nimeiri's domestic problems, but it would offer him the considerable advantages of at least temporarily suspending Libyan subversion and support for Sudanese dissidents. [redacted]

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Nimeiri would view any such agreement with Libya as a temporary measure and not a replacement for his ties with the United States. Nonetheless, a Sudanese-Libyan reconciliation would inevitably alter the tone of Nimeiri's relationship with Washington. Khartoum

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[redacted] would be less inclined to participate in military exercises with the United States and less supportive of US positions in multilateral forums. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the Egypt-Sudan Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, at the request of the National Intelligence Officer for Africa. It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asia and within the Directorate of Intelligence. Information as of 22 January 1985 was used in preparation of this paper. Comments and queries are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, [redacted]

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President Nimeiri's recent conciliatory gestures toward the rebellious south have been turned aside, and there is little prospect in the near term for a political settlement of the conflict. Moderate southern politicians are divided over the region's administrative structure, and major insurgent leaders continue to rebuff Nimeiri's overtures. The Libyan- and Ethiopian-backed southern rebels stepped up their activity last month in what may be the start of an offensive. Government forces are hardpressed to contain rebel attacks, and vital development projects remain shut down. Nimeiri has appealed to his benefactors, primarily Egypt and the United States, for additional military assistance to combat the insurgents, especially helicopter gunships and transport aircraft, but has not received a response satisfactory to him or his armed forces.

[redacted]

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Since last fall, Nimeiri has tried to placate foreign and domestic critics by slowing Islamization and releasing key northern opponents from detention, in addition to seeking reconciliation with the south. These tactics have not yet generated the increased foreign economic and military support Nimeiri deems necessary to ward off civil unrest this spring or to underwrite a solution to the southern problem. Khartoum, which is in arrears to the IMF, has been reluctant to impose stringent austerity measures, fearing they would heighten the prospect of civil disorders. Chronic mismanagement of the economy has caused foreign donors to hesitate to provide further aid. In late December, the US Government officially notified Nimeiri it might cut off all assistance if he failed to comply with IMF measures.

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Last October, Nimeiri publicly expressed his frustration over the slowdown of foreign aid and suggested a provocative solution to his problems in the south. In an interview with an Arab language paper published in London, Nimeiri said the Western press and financial institutions--who, he claimed oppose his country's Islamic line--had persuaded their governments to slow aid to Sudan. He specifically noted that "media pressure had led to a tangible delay in the delivery of US military and economic aid to Sudan at a time when the United States is aware of the threat to our country's national unity...." In an interview with Le Monde, Nimeiri said that if he found himself without means to defeat the rebels in the south, he would "have no hesitation in bringing about a reconciliation with Libya, the Soviet Union and Ethiopia."

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Libyan Diplomatic Overtures and Sudanese Responses

Qadhafi has made at least five separate diplomatic overtures to the Nimeiri regime since last spring. These initiatives are part of a broader strategy of reconciliation and accommodation with neighboring Arab regimes intended to limit Arab support to Libya's opponents, lessen US influence in the region, and end Tripoli's diplomatic isolation. Qadhafi's efforts already have produced the political "union" with Morocco, the expansion of commercial and arms supply relationships with Italy, Greece, and Malta, meetings with Spanish Prime Minister Gonzalez and French President Mitterrand, and a fragile accommodation with France over Chad. [REDACTED]

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Saudi Arabia appears to have brokered the first significant Libyan-Sudanese contact, which took place last April in Mecca between Sudanese Vice President Tayyib and Libyan adviser Qadhaf al-Dam. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The meeting produced no agreement, and it appeared badly timed, in that it was preceded by the Libyan bombing of Omdurman in mid-March and followed by an attack by Sudanese backed Libyan dissidents in Tripoli in early May. [REDACTED]

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Nonetheless, Tayyib kept channels to Libya open. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Qadhafi has continued to increase his aid to the southern rebels, apparently calculating that Nimeiri might become more responsive if insurgent successes threatened Khartoum's control of the south. [REDACTED]

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Benefits and Costs to Nimeiri of a Reconciliation

A reconciliation with Libya could cost Nimeiri much of the political and economic support he gets from his current allies. Nimeiri may believe that he is already losing it, however, and that reconciliation with Libya--or the threat of it--would give him new leverage with his allies. He probably would anticipate being as successful as Morocco in presenting reconciliation as a fait accompli. He would try to portray his accommodation with the Libyans as merely a tactical ploy designed to confound his "Communist" opponents. Nimeiri probably expects the most positive response from Riyadh, because of past Saudi efforts to mediate between Libya and Sudan. Cairo and Washington would be greater challenges, but he may believe that their concern for maintaining their own strategic and economic interests in Sudan--and the absence of an obvious alternative to himself as President--would temper their reaction. [REDACTED]

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We believe the most likely Libyan-Sudanese agreement would entail restoration of diplomatic relations and a suspension of support for each other's dissidents, rather than a political "union" with Libya similar to that of Morocco. No agreement with Qadhafi would solve problems with the economy or the south, but it

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would at least temporarily remove the extra burden of Libyan subversion and support for Nimeiri's opponents in southern Sudan. Qadhafi might offer some economic aid as an inducement to reach an agreement. He could be expected to honor most of the agreement in the short-run, because the suspension of anti-Qadhafi radiobroadcasts from Sudanese territory and of other types of Sudanese support to Libyan dissidents would be a major gain for him. Over the longer term, Qadhafi would still try to undermine any government in Khartoum that did not condemn US policy in the Middle East, particularly by using northern Muslim dissidents, but this is of less concern to Nimeiri than solving his immediate problems. [redacted]

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A side-benefit for the Nimeiri regime of a rapprochement with Libya would be a more nonaligned image and the prospect of improved ties with the USSR. Sudan's relations with Moscow--paralleling those of Egypt--might improve enough to attract Soviet military and economic aid. Khartoum has in past years resisted Moscow's efforts to improve relations, but recently Khartoum has carried on a series of low-level cultural exchanges with Moscow. The speaker of the Sudanese parliament will soon make an official visit to the USSR. Although the Soviets would be skeptical that any Libyan-Sudanese reconciliation could endure, they almost certainly would welcome the rapprochement in the hope that it would provide an entree for themselves in Khartoum or at least reduce US influence there. Moscow might also calculate that closer Libyan-Sudanese relations would lead Khartoum to reduce its support for opponents of Ethiopia's Marxist regime. [redacted]

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We believe Nimeiri may be personally vulnerable to Libyan blandishments at this time. Although his antipathy toward Qadhafi is profound, because of Qadhafi's efforts to topple his regime since the mid-1970s, Nimeiri is increasingly driven by personal and political desperation. Concern with his own deteriorating health has, in our opinion, led to his personal turn to Islam and his efforts to impose his religious views on his nation. Nimeiri is thus susceptible if Qadhafi pitches his argument on the theme of common Islamic goals. Indeed, Nimeiri's recent rhetoric suggests he believes Western allies are shunning him because of his Islamization program. [redacted]

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Implications for the Southern Problem

If Libya suspended or diminished its aid to the southern Sudanese rebels, Nimeiri probably would lean even more toward a military solution, reasoning--we believe incorrectly--that

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government forces would finally gain the upper hand. He would still have to ask for additional military support from allies, however, and to send northern troops south to fight the insurgents. The decline in morale among government forces would be checked only temporarily, if at all. The regime would remain vulnerable to a military coup triggered by the southern problem.

[redacted]

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The southern insurgents probably would respond in the short term to a Nimeiri-Qadhafi reconciliation by stepping up their attacks and placing maximum pressure on the regime, hoping the Sudanese military would move to replace Nimeiri. If this strategy failed, they would still have enough captured military equipment and supplies to operate at a lower level. They could also maintain pressure on the regime by keeping important oil and water projects shut down through terrorism and kidnapping of foreign nationals.

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Regional Implications

Egypt--whose own relations with Qadhafi have recently been strained to the verge of military confrontation--would initially be highly upset by a Sudanese-Libyan accord. Cairo, however, might eventually see some benefits for itself in the longer run. An improvement of security in southern Sudan might raise hopes for the resumption of work on the Jonglei Canal, a water diversion project important to Egypt. It might also lessen Khartoum's pressure on Egypt for major military assistance for the south.

[redacted]

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Saudi Arabia would give a Nimeiri-Qadhafi rapprochement guarded support, and Riyadh might even offer Khartoum more economic assistance. As in the case of the Moroccan-Libyan Union, Riyadh would see the reconciliation as placing constraints on Qadhafi and reducing his subversive activities in the region.

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A Sudanese-Libyan accommodation would mean further political polarization in North Africa. Algeria would be displeased by the accord and probably would improve its relations with Egypt to try to offset Qadhafi's latest gain. Morocco probably would point to the agreement as another sign of Qadhafi's moderation in regional politics. Weak states that are potential targets of Libyan troublemaking, such as Tunisia and Niger, probably would be more likely to conclude that they need to strike their own deals with Qadhafi.

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The reconciliation probably would ease tensions in the Horn of Africa, at least on the surface. Somali President Siad Barre, who reportedly agreed recently to establish consular relations with the Libyans, might be prompted by Nimeiri's lead to further upgrade relations, especially if Tripoli promises to suspend aid to Somali dissidents and offers economic assistance. Ethiopia might make its own reconciliation overture to Sudan. Khartoum has reached several similar agreements with Addis Ababa in the past; they rarely have lasted long. But each country, facing overwhelming famine and refugee problems, probably would consider a breathing space in their long quarrel advantageous. [REDACTED]

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Conclusion

Nimeiri's foreign policy has been characterized by pragmatism and responsiveness to the domestic political demands of the moment. He is a master of sudden moves that throw his opponents off balance, and he has repeatedly demonstrated his capacity to change policy dramatically. In the three years following the Libyan-backed coup attempt of 1976, he made two rapprochements with Qadhafi. The principal factor in Nimeiri's decision this time will be his perception of whether his allies plan cutbacks of political, economic, and military support. [REDACTED]

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Implications for the United States

Nimeiri would view an accommodation with Libya as a temporary measure that would not replace his ties with the United States--and this is the line he would almost certainly take with US officials. He seems to value his relations with the United States and probably has no desire to turn completely to Libya or the USSR. He may wait to see if his trip to Washington next month produces more economic and military support before moving ahead with Libya. [REDACTED]

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A Sudanese-Libyan reconciliation, however, would inevitably alter the tone of Nimeiri's relationship with the United States. Khartoum probably would be neutralized as the most effective base of operations for Libyan dissidents. In addition, Khartoum would be less likely to cooperate with Washington on projects such as the movement of Ethiopian Jews (Falasha) to Israel. Nimeiri is likely to resist Qadhafi's pressure to condemn Camp David, but he probably would support the US position in regional and international forums less frequently than he does now. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] To avoid Libyan criticism, however, Nimeiri would become less inclined to approve other forms of security cooperation with the United States, including participation in joint military exercises. [REDACTED]

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